

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

April 23, 2013

PCSSD Hires New Deputy Superintendent (Arkansas CW TV)

LITTLE ROCK, AR - A new deputy superintendent is joining the Pulaski County Special School District.

Dr. Laura Bednar will oversee the Learning Services Division. She will manage instruction, curriculum, professional development for certified employees, federal programs, workforce development, gifted and talented programs, fine arts programs, athletics, counseling and testing.

Dr. Bednar currently works as the assistant commissioner of the Arkansas Department of Education.

She will replace Linda Remele, Ed.D., who resigned effective June 30.

Superintendent Jerry Guess, Ed.D., said he is excited Bednar is joining the PCSSD team. "Dr. Remele has done good work in her two years with us, and we have the ideal person to continue that progress. We're looking forward to the expertise, experience and respect for public education that Dr. Bednar brings to the table," he said.

Bednar joined the Arkansas Department of Education in 2010. From 2004 until 2010 she served as superintendent of schools for the Stuttgart School District. She was the language arts curriculum coordinator for PCSSD from 2000 until 2004, and prior to that she worked as a classroom teacher and administrator.

She has a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, a Master of Education in Education Administration and Supervision from the University of Arkansas and a Doctor of Education in Education Administration and Supervision from the University of Arkansas.

Arkansas Tech Master of Education Program Reaching out to Teachers in Pulaski County, State's Delta Region (KARK, Channel 4)

RUSSELLVILLE, AR (News Release) - K-12 schools in central and eastern Arkansas will soon have enhanced leadership capacity because of a new program offered through Arkansas Tech University.

LEAD 21 is a new initiative by the Arkansas Tech Center for Leadership and Learning that will make the Arkansas Tech Master of Education degree in educational leadership available to selected teachers in Pulaski County and the Delta region of Arkansas through a blended format of online course offerings and seminars.

The program is made possible through a \$996,682 grant from the Walton Family Foundation.

"This program is designed to make the Master of Education degree in educational leadership from Arkansas Tech accessible to teachers from around the state who might not have previously had the ability to pursue it," said Dr. Mary Gunter, dean of the Arkansas Tech Graduate College. "LEAD 21 will identify potential leaders in difficult to serve areas. Participants will commit to a rigorous two-year graduate program, and they will also make a commitment to remain as educators in Arkansas for two years after their graduation."

LEAD 21 will serve two cohorts of 20 Master of Education in educational leadership students each over the next four years. The first cohort will begin its studies in summer 2013. The second cohort will begin the program in summer 2014.

Dr. Matt McClure, superintendent of the Cross County School District, will serve as coordinator and facilitator for the LEAD 21 program.

"Dr. McClure brings experience working in isolated school districts," said Gunter. "He has successfully implemented the educational theories of problem-based learning and pay for performance. He is an innovator in our field."

Teachers interested in participating in the LEAD 21 program must meet the geographic requirements of the program, submit an application, take part in a writing assessment and be interviewed by representatives from the Arkansas Tech Center for Leadership and Learning.

"LEAD 21 will create a cadre of leaders that will help schools develop leadership capacity within their districts as positions become available," said Gunter. "Our goal is to measure the impact of the program in both student achievement and building success."

The Arkansas Tech Center for Leadership and Learning received 34 applications for its first LEAD 21 cohort. Those applications are under review and the 20 participants in the first cohort will be announced later this spring.

"A key component to student success is having great school leaders," said Kathy Smith, senior program officer at the Walton Family Foundation. "This program will provide important training and help keep those leaders in Arkansas."

Gunter said that in addition to covering the costs of tuition for LEAD 21 cohort participants, the funding from the Walton Family Foundation will also allow the Arkansas Tech Center for Leadership and Learning to employ a faculty member that will teach LEAD 21 students and serve as their advisor.

"On behalf of the Arkansas Tech Graduate College, I express my appreciation to the Walton Family Foundation for its continued support of the Arkansas Tech Center for Leadership and Learning," said Gunter. "LEAD 21 is an important program because it will increase the talent pool for educational leadership in our state. We are grateful to the Walton Family Foundation for making LEAD 21 possible."

Arkansas Scholars Program honors graduating seniors (Pine Bluff Commercial)

With graduation ceremonies quickly approaching, a large number of Jefferson County high school seniors who made good on their Arkansas Scholars Program pledges were recognized Monday night at the Pine Bluff Convention Center and rewarded for their dedication.

With siblings, parents and grandparents accompanying them, the young achievers from Dollarway, Pine Bluff, St. Joseph, Watson Chapel and White Hall high schools drew their salutes in an ASP awards presentation supported by the Greater Pine Bluff Chamber of Commerce and Arkansas Business and Education Alliance.

The program requires a four-year commitment by eighth-graders to make certain that they adhere to criteria designed to enrich their lives as adults, whether they attend college or a technical school, work part or full time or join a branch of the military. The students were told that their level of education will have a direct impact on their level of income potential as education provides a “return-on-investment” throughout an individual’s life.

To become an Arkansas Scholar, the students — during their freshman, sophomore, junior and senior years — are required do the following:

- Take the Smart Core curriculum;
- Make a semester grade of “C” or better in all academic courses;
- Attend school at least 95 percent of the time; and
- Complete high school in eight consecutive semesters.

The promised returns for those who honor their pledge are:

- More choices for education after high school;
- More opportunities for good jobs;
- More money to buy the things they desire; and
- More control over their futures.

The scholars become eligible for academic challenge scholarships, if they have a minimum grade point average of 2.5 with Smart Core or have a minimum ACT score of 19.

Chamber Director Ann Williams distributed awards to the students. Regina Montgomery of Entergy Arkansas chairs the county’s ASP Committee.

Among the honorees was White Hall's Landen Walker, who is looking at earning a college degree and then following his father, Russell Walker, and grandfather, George Burckhalter, in a career at Entergy Arkansas. The younger Walker wants to be an electrical engineer. His father and grandfather are linemen.

Also at the event was Anna Newcomb, a 23-year-old WHHS graduate who is now an elementary school teacher in Sheridan. Newcomb, a University of Arkansas cum laude graduate, is Landen Walker's sister. Their mother is Whitney White.

"Good study habits run in our family," Newcomb said. "Our parents and grandparents raised us to realize that a good education is not an option."

Newcomb's and Landen Walker's grandmother, Carol Burckhalter, said she and her husband have "put out a lot of money" on the family's education.

"It's all worth it," she said. "It feels good to know that Landen fulfilled all the criteria for this program."

School elections still unchanged - Editorial (The Leader, Jacksonville)

A lot of money went into an unsuccessful campaign in the legislature to change school elections from September to election day in November. The theory was that moving the elections to when more people turn out to vote would make it more difficult to raise millage rates to spend on public schools.

The charter schools and big foundations were supposedly putting serious money behind the effort, but it failed mostly because school superintendents hated the idea.

The Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators, the Arkansas School Boards Association and the Arkansas Education Association opposed the bill. School superintendents in particular lobbied against the bill, and they were persuasive enough to kill the bill.

School superintendents are most often the community leaders who are respected and admired and are paid as well as doctors, lawyers and bankers.

Superintendents are more respected than the newspaper editors who editorialized in favor of the bill.

Special interests opposed to public schools were pushing the bill too hard, which was another reason it failed. Superintendents and their boards like school elections in September, and we do, too, just as we like primaries in the spring. Voting two or three times a year might be too much of a bother for some people, but we don't mind it all: Elections remind us of who we are and what we believe in and give us hope that maybe the people we vote for can make a difference for the better.

Unfortunately, residents in the Pulaski County Special School District cannot vote this year for a school board, which remains inactive while the district is under state supervision. But if you live in Lonoke or White counties, don't forget to vote Sept. 17 for your school board.

Lighthouse plans to build middle and high schools (The Leader, Jacksonville)

The headline in Saturday's Leader: "Cabot schools about to hit 10,000."

The headline in last Wednesday's Leader: "Charter school growing," referring to the Lighthouse Academy in Jacksonville, which has added a seventh grade and has nearly 400 students enrolled in its second year.

While turmoil continues in the Pulaski County Special School District, which can't even decide when classes should start, the Lighthouse Academy keeps expanding: It has received state approval for a middle school at Little Rock Air Force Base next year, and there are also plans for a high school near the elementary charter school on North First Street.

If this trend continues, Lighthouse — where students are called scholars — might build a new school here every couple of years, much like Cabot, which has benefited from the flight of families from Pulaski County.

Charter school officials told a group of parents and interested residents meeting at the Jacksonville Community Center on Monday that the middle school would have open enrollment, like all charter schools, which would allow nonmilitary kids from all over the area to attend the new school with proper identification.

The base school would be an alternative to Northwood Middle School, which is on the state watch list for not meeting minimum standards. It faces possible closure if it doesn't improve.

"The Air Force is providing us with a free building, and we'd be crazy not to take it," said former state Rep. Mike Wilson of Jacksonville, who is leading the drive for the new middle school.

The former officers club, which was set for demolition, would house the new middle school. Costs for the renovation have not yet been determined, but philanthropists like Wilson and others — including the Waltons of Walmart fame, the Fishers of the Gap clothing chain and the Pritzker family of the Hyatt Hotels — have given millions to charter schools.

They are built with private funds but receive state aid, which is \$5,876 per student, 30 percent less than the \$8,960 for regular public school students.

But since the facilities come from private sources and there's no busing for students, more money is spent on classroom instruction. Classes are eight hours a day — an hour longer than other schools in Pulaski County, and school stays open a couple of weeks longer.

Phillis Nichols Anderson, Lighthouse Academies vice president for the southern region, said the middle school will probably have about 150 students in grades six through eight, with two classes for each grades.

A lottery would determine who gets into the school if more than 150 students apply, which is likely, since there is a waiting list of some 600 students who want to attend the elementary charter school in Jacksonville.

Anderson, a Lonoke County native, said there's room for a high school behind or next to the elementary school.

Col. Andy Coggins, commander of the 19th Airlift Wing Mission Support Group, who will oversee the middle school project, said engineers are at the base this week studying ways to make the old officers club into a school.

"The facility is in great shape," Coggins said. "It will not be just for military families. We'll bend over backward to make access as easy as possible" for nonmilitary students.

He said, "We're trying to find more educational opportunities other than Northwood."

One parent complained, "I feel I have no other choice but to send my child to Northwood. That's no choice at all."

She said she hoped her child could attend the new school.

The Lighthouse Academy was the first new public school built in Jacksonville in 30 years. Parents like the new facilities, smaller classrooms and individual attention their children receive.

The school has a simple philosophy. "We believe all children can achieve at high levels," said principal Ryan Dean. "We prepare all students for college. High expectations get results. We strive for nothing less than excellence."

There are some two dozen charter schools in Arkansas with nearly 4,000 students, about 1 percent of the public school students in the state. Nationwide, more than 1.5 million children attend charter schools.

The Pulaski County Special School District is slow to release enrollment numbers, but they continue their steep decline.

Changing around the opening bell only days before the new school year has not helped enrollment.

If the trend continues locally, Jacksonville charter schools alone could have more than 1,000 kids in a few years.

The reason for their success?

"We've got something special going on," said vice president Anderson with a smile.

8 students, 4 teachers win Stephens Awards (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Eight Little Rock high school seniors and four teachers from Little Rock-area high schools are recipients of the 2013 Stephens Awards.

The award program provides a \$5,000 scholarship to each student and a \$7,500 cash award to each selected instructor.

Student winners are: Taylor Adams, Catholic High School for Boys, son of Michele and Ken Adams; Noor Alshami, Pulaski Academy, daughter of Ayman and Bana Alshami; David Chen, Little Rock Central High School, son of Ying and Tao Chen; Arhita Dasgupta, Little Rock Central High, daughter of Shree and Tonmoy Dasgupta; Helen Hathaway, Mount St. Mary Academy, daughter of Laura and Jeff Hathaway; Chirag Lala, Little Rock Central High, son of Kamlesh and Anju Lala; Sonia Helen Pascale, Episcopal Collegiate School, daughter of Mildred J. Franco and James J. Pascale; and Andrew Ricciardone, Little Rock Central High, son of Jill and Tom Ricciardone.

The award-winning teachers are: Christen Bufford, Little Rock Central High; Angela B. Collins, Mount St. Mary Academy; Stephanie Hartnedy, Catholic High School for Boys; and Keith Richardson, Little Rock Central High.

The scholarships and awards are provided by The City Education Trust. Jackson T. Stephens and the W.R. "Witt" Stephens formed the trust in 1985 with proceeds from the sale of the Stephens' interest in Riverside Cable Television Co.

In addition to the scholarships and awards, the students and teachers were recognized Monday with a reception in their honor at the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce office building.

LR School Board OKs buying land for \$5.57 million (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

The Little Rock School Board at a special meeting Monday approved the purchase of three pieces of property - two adjoining pieces in northwest Little Rock and another piece in the southwest part of the city - for a total of \$5.572 million.

Preliminary plans call for building a new middle school on 43.5 acres on the city's west side and constructing a replacement for McClellan High on the 56 acres in southwest Little Rock, but those decisions likely won't be finalized until a district wide facility study, including enrollment-growth projections, is completed.

Board member Jody Carreiro made the motion to accept the recommendations from the administration to buy the land, the locations and other details of which were publicly disclosed for the first time Monday night.

"From a policy point we asked the administration to find us appropriate pieces of property and when they did, that we would back them up," he said. "And that is what I intend to do, back them up on what they did."

"Now, are they perfect? Am I voting on what we are going to build on those pieces of property? No, I'm not voting on that at all tonight," he said and added that he would wait for the the facility study to proceed.

Board member Mike Nellums abstained in the 6-0-1 vote for the purchase of the property, which is contingent on the completion of feasibility studies. He and board member Tommy Branch Jr. both said that they had received a lot of information Monday and wanted time to digest it.

"All the information was not publicly divulged," Nellums said, despite his asking for it. "The transparency has not been 100 percent."

Board President Dianne Curry said at a meeting Thursday and again Monday that board members had been invited to talk to the district administrators about the proposed purchases. She noted that the board's goals for this school year included the purchase of land in both west and southwest Little Rock.

Parents from the northwest section of the district have pleaded with the School Board for years for a middle school west of Interstate 430 and in the vicinity of Dr. Don R. Roberts Elementary, which is the district's newest elementary and full to its 900-pupil capacity in its third year of operation.

"For west Little Rock, this is fantastic news," said Kelliann Thornton, the parent of a Roberts pupil who manages a Facebook page about the push for a new middle school.

"It's been a long time coming, but hopefully this is the first step in moving forward. We have a lot of work to do," she said, and expressed some hope that the site might be large enough for a high school, as well.

The west Little Rock site is across Cantrell Road and a little to the west from Roberts Elementary, along North Katillus Road. The property, which is adjacent to The Ranch office park, is made up of two parcels. One is approximately 40 acres and is priced at \$3.4 million. The other is 3.5 acres and priced at \$800,000.

The smaller site is being sold by Professional Property Co., LLC. The seller of the larger site is the William L. Adams Family Trust, according to Kelsey Bailey, the district's chief financial officer.

The average price per square foot is \$2.22, or almost \$97,000 per acre, said Stuart Mackey, of the Coldwell Banker Commercial- Hathaway Group, which represents the district in real-estate transactions.

That price compares with the nearly \$282,700 average per acre the district paid for the 19.72 acres about five years ago that make up the Roberts campus.

In selecting the Katillus Road site, district officials also looked at 52 acres on Rummell Road, which has a very steep terrain, and 20 acres on Cantrell and Taylor Loop West, directly across Cantrell from Roberts Elementary, but is small lot for a middle school.

The Katillus Road site, on which there are some rental houses, would rely on access to Ranch Boulevard to the traffic signal on Cantrell Road, Mackey said.

The southwest Little Rock site, referred to as the Richsmith Lane site, is priced at \$1,372,000. The seller is the Martin Revocable Living Trust.

The property is bounded by Richsmith Lane on the north and Mann Road on the south. It is behind the Home Depot store in southwest Little Rock.

It is one of four sites district officials considered in the area. Those included 40 acres at 4200 Base Line Road, up to 162 acres at Geyer Springs Road and Mabelvale Cut-off, and up to 122 acres on Mann Road. Reluctant sellers, high-voltage power lines and utility issues were some of the problems cited for each of those.

Acting Superintendent Marvin Burton, a former McClellan principal, said McClellan, with its open-air courtyards and corridors, must be replaced if it is to provide a curriculum that stresses science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Carla Coleman, a member of the audience from the Mc-Clellan area, questioned the board about the possibility of rebuilding McClellan at its current site, as has been done with other district schools. Burton said that the district could not accommodate the 900 McClellan students at other sites nor could a new building be built adjacent to the old without demolishing the widely used stadium and athletic fields at the campus at 9417 Geyer Springs Road.

Schools' officers on table (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

North Little Rock aldermen agreed Monday night to examine how much the city pays to place resource officers in public schools and to ask the North Little Rock School District if it would share that expense.

Alderman Linda Robinson, the resolution's sponsor, said the legislation isn't intended to stop the school resource officer program, but only to reassess the city's financial commitment.

City Council members voted 7-0 for the resolution. Alderman Charlie Hight passed on his vote.

Mayor Joe Smith said last week that he didn't support the legislation, adding that he wouldn't favor any changes in the program because "it's working."

Resource officers are city police officers assigned to schools who are authorized to carry weapons on school grounds and make arrests. The city pays 100 percent of the cost to have a school resource officer at each of six district schools, or more than \$413,718 annually, Danny Bradley, the mayor's chief

of staff and the city's former police chief, said last week. The figure is based on an average cost per officer, he said.

The city has had as many as eight resource officers in North Little Rock schools in previous years, Bradley said.

Robinson spoke adamantly at the City Council meeting, saying she wasn't trying to end the program nor reduce the number of school resource officers. Section 2 of the resolution, however, states that if negotiations with the school district to share the cost aren't productive, then recommendations would be made to the City Council "regarding continuation of the city's funding" for school resource officers.

Little Rock splits the cost with the Little Rock School District to have 16 school resource officers at city high schools and in three of its middle schools.

"The purpose of this is not to get rid of resource officers in the schools," Robinson said to the council Monday, adding that the city has paid 100 percent of the program's cost for about 20 years.

"What I'm asking is to sit down with the school district to reassess this program," Robinson said. "My thing is, we have had this program in place for 20 years. We need to reassess that program and see if the school district would pay some of the cost.

"I cannot see us paying \$400,000 for this for the next 20 years," she added, noting other city budget needs.

"I love your passion," Smith said to Robinson when she finished.

Alderman Debi Ross said she supported Robinson's request because it looks out for taxpayers' money.

"In no way does this mean I want to do away with school resource officers," Ross said of her support. "Our job is budgetary. It's the residents' money."

Before voting, Aldermen Bruce Foutch and Beth White asked Smith to clarify that the resolution wouldn't make any changes at this time to the school resource officer program. The resolution, Smith said, is only to look at the expenditure and negotiate with the school district for possibly sharing some of the cost.

School Board President Scott Teague said last week that it would be "an added expense" for the school district if it were to share in the costs for resource officers, but called the program "extremely important" to the district.

The resolution states that a report on the resource officer program's cost is to be made to the City Council by June 24.

\$197 million state budget rise OK'd (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

The Arkansas House and Senate on Monday handily approved bills that would increase the state budget by \$197 million in the fiscal year starting July 1.

They also signed off on measures distributing the state's surplus of \$300 million to various projects across the state.

On the 99th day of the 2013 session, the Senate also voted to designate Senate Republican Whip Jonathan Dismang of Searcy as its leader for 2015 and 2016.

With no debate or discussion, the Senate voted 28-6 to approve the budget bill, Senate Bill 22, sponsored by the Joint Budget Committee.

In a subsequent 80-15 vote, the House approved an identical budget bill, House Bill 2233, sponsored by Rep. Duncan Baird, R-Lowell, with no debate.

In a 28-6 vote, the Senate approved a measure distributing "general improvement" money. Senate Bill 364, also known as the General Improvement Distribution Act of 2013, was sponsored by the Joint Budget Committee and sets aside hundreds of millions of surplus tax dollars "for various projects and purposes." The House later voted 79-13 to approve an identical bill, House Bill 2232, by Baird.

The measures set aside \$107 million of the surplus for the state's Medicaid program, and \$100 million for projects to be determined by Democratic Gov. Mike Beebe. Among other things, they include \$3.5 million each for certain projects at Cossatot Community College of the University of Arkansas and University of Arkansas Community College at Hope; and \$3 million each for certain projects at Arkansas Tech University, Arkansas State University, University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and University of Central Arkansas.

The budget bills largely mirror Beebe's proposed budget with the public schools and the Medicaid program getting most of the increase. State employees who don't work at the state's higher-education institutions would get a 2 percent cost-of-living raise under the proposal. They haven't received cost-of-living raises in fiscal 2012 and fiscal 2013.

Senate President Pro Tempore Michael Lamoureux, R-Russellville, later said the state's budget for fiscal 2014 is fair.

"I thought there would be more clash over the budget itself, but we spent so much time on so many other issues that the truth is it is very difficult to cut the budget from the Legislature side," said Lamoureux, who served in the Senate since December 2009 and was in the House from 2003-09. "You can cut it, but you really don't know what you are doing. If you cut the prison budget or you cut too far, you do real harm."

Lamoureux said he wanted to have a state budget for fiscal 2014 that Beebe and legislative leaders agreed on, and “other issues took priority over fighting over that.”

Sen. Alan Clark, R-Lonsdale, said he voted against SB22 and SB364 because the measures allow for “too much government growth,” adding that he opposes the “private option” that the Legislature has authorized to allow the use of federal Medicaid dollars to purchase health-insurance coverage for about 250,000 low-income Arkansans.

He’s one of six Republican senators who voted against Monday’s budget measures.

House Republican leader Bruce Westerman of Hot Springs is among the Republican representatives who voted against HB2232 and HB2233.

SB22 and HB2233 divided the projected general revenue into A, B and C categories with the first \$4.786 billion going to the A category, the next \$131 million to the B category and a final \$6.65 million to the C category. The three categories total \$4.924 billion - up from the current budget of \$4.727 billion.

The measures prioritize the distribution of state general revenue to state agencies on the basis of these three categories.

The state’s revenue forecast for fiscal 2014 fully funds categories A and B, and tax collections beyond that could cover Category C. The proposed budget factors in \$10 million in reduced revenue from tax cuts in fiscal 2014 and sets aside \$18 million in rainy-day funds.

Under the proposed budget, the Public School Fund providing state aid for the state’s 239 districts would increase by nearly \$47 million to \$2.046 billion. That would all be in the A category.

The state Department of Human Services would get a nearly \$95 million increase to \$1.226 billion, with the state’s Medicaid program getting an \$85 million increase to \$890 million. All but \$1.7 million for the department’s Behavioral Health Services Division would be in Categories A and B. Beyond that \$1.7 million, Category C also includes \$2.6 million for the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, \$1.587 million for the state Health Department and \$687,500 for the state Department of Correction.

The funding for the state’s higher-education institutions would increase by \$7 million to \$736 million with all but the \$2.6 million for uncompensated care at UAMS in Categories A and B.

The Correction Department would get a \$14 million increase to \$312 million under the budget proposal. The Department of Community Correction would receive a \$7 million increase to \$76 million.

SB364 and HB2232 would give Beebe discretion to spend about \$100 million of the state’s surplus on state projects and give the House and Senate each \$35 million to spend on their favored projects. Each of the 35 senators received \$1 million apiece for their favored projects.

The measures also provide \$107 million in onetime funding to the state’s Medicaid program, more than \$30 million in projects at the state’s higher-education institutions, \$13 million in lease

payments for the Correction Department, \$8 million to bolster the catastrophic fund for teacher health insurance benefits, and \$7.5 million in state funds to match a possible federal grant to help construct a veterans home.

NEXT SENATE LEADER

The Senate voted unanimously to select Dismang as the Senate president pro tempore-designate. He was the only senator to seek the post.

Barring a Democratic takeover of the Senate, he is expected to hold the job during the 90th General Assembly.

Last November, the Senate elected Lamoureux as the Senate president pro tempore for 2013 and 2014 after Republicans gained control of the Senate, although it had selected Democratic Sen. Larry Teague of Nashville in 2011 as the Senate president pro tempore-designate. Teague agreed in 2011 to support Lamoureux to be the Senate's leader if the Republicans gained control of the chamber.

Dismang has served in the Senate since 2011 and was in the House from 2009-2011.

He told senators that he would consider himself to be the leader of the Arkansas Senate - not as the leader of the Senate Republicans - as the Senate president pro tempore in 2015 and 2016. He is the Senate Republican whip.

The Senate is made up of 21 Republicans and 14 Democrats.

Lawmakers prepare to wrap up session (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Arkansas lawmakers are set to give final approval to the bill detailing the state's \$4.9 billion budget as they prepare to recess this year's session.

The House and Senate plan to vote Tuesday on the proposed Revenue Stabilization Act before recessing. Both chambers have already approved identical versions of the bill, which sets the state's spending priorities based on expected revenues.

The votes will mark the end of the 100-day session, with Republicans in control of the House and Senate for the first time since Reconstruction. Lawmakers during the session approved legislation allowing the state to use federal Medicaid money to purchase private insurance for thousands of low-income residents.

Central High official pleads innocent to harassment charges (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

The Little Rock Central High School administrator accused of harassing students entered an innocent plea before a judge Tuesday.

Thomas McDonald, 55, spoke only once during the short hearing in Little Rock District Court, telling Judge Alice Lightle he understood the terms of a no-contact order that bars him from contacting the victims in the case.

Lightle then set a July 10 trial date on five misdemeanor charges of harassment.

McDonald, who became an interim assistant principal at the beginning of the school year, has been on administrative leave since the district learned he was being investigated by police.

Authorities say multiple students reported McDonald made inappropriate sexual advances, including unwanted touching and uncomfortable conversations about their sex lives.

After the hearing, McDonald didn't answer a question from a reporter while his attorney attempted to block the reporter from taking a photograph. While walking back to their vehicle, attorney Mark Burnette described the case as "something so insignificant."

ADE to recommend Drew Central be released from fiscal distress (Advance Monticellonian)

The Arkansas Department of Education will recommend to the state board of education that Drew Central be released from fiscal distress during May's regular board meeting.

Phyllis Stewart, chief of staff at ADE, said one of the agenda items for the May 13 Arkansas Board of Education meeting is to recommend that Drew Central be released from fiscal distress.

Interim Superintendent Mike Johnston announced the news Thursday to the faculty and staff at Drew Central.

The school was placed on fiscal distress last spring due to dwindling enrollment coupled with a declining ending balance each year.

Until the state board of education meets and votes, the action is not official and the district remains in fiscal distress until the vote is made.

Johnston and other school officials plan to attend the meeting to answer any questions the board might have about the school's financial situation.

Principal is walking tall at JHS (The Leader, Jacksonville)

Jacksonville High School was in awful shape last July when Henry Anderson took over the failed school in a failed school district.

The place was rundown, morale was terrible and test scores were falling along with graduating rates.

The state Education Department had just taken over the Pulaski County Special School District. Teachers and staff grumbled because their unions faced decertification.

Suddenly, Anderson, 41, showed up like a new sheriff in town and told his staff: Help me clean up this mess or go teach someplace else.

"It's been an exciting, roller-coaster year," Anderson told the Jacksonville Rotary Club meeting Monday at Southern Oaks Country Club. But, he said, he's seeing some encouraging results.

Test scores have improved, he said. Math and literacy scores are up 9 to 10 percent. There's still a long way to go, but Anderson has inspired teachers and students to care about test scores.

Graduation rates are way up. Only 15 of 166 seniors failed to earn diplomas this year, a big improvement over recent graduation rates of a little more than 50 percent. One of the 15 students who didn't graduate, Anderson said, was only half a credit away.

"If we can get them on the right track, they'll be able to graduate," the principal said.

Anderson is tired of seeing the school called one of the worst in the state. He wants JHS off the needs-improvement list and make it as good as it was 30 and 40 years ago, when it offered advanced-placement courses that were among the best in the state.

"We got a clean bill of health this year," he said. "We've become a model. The school district is sending principals to our school to see what we're doing right," Anderson said. "The U.S. Department of Education will visit us to see how the school is making these improvements."

Back in June 2011, before Anderson showed up, the high school was so bad, it qualified for a multi-million school-improvement grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Jacksonville received a \$2 million improvement grant from the department. Three other failing high schools — all in the poverty-stricken Delta — received slightly lesser amounts.

The four high schools — the others are Helena-West Helena, Marvell and Dollarway — were ranked in the bottom 5 percent in the state, which qualified them for the school-improvement grants.

This is a grant you don't want to shout about, but Anderson doesn't mind bringing it up. He said Jacksonville is doing so well, it will get an additional \$1.7 million this year and \$2 million more in 2013, or as much as \$5.7 million over three years.

Students now have computers in labs and classrooms and several iPads. There's campus-wide wireless Internet, Promethian interactive whiteboards, equipment for science labs, recording equipment for band, choir and television-production classes, access to on-campus licensed social workers, credit recovery and concurrent enrollment with Arkansas Baptist College in Little Rock.

The school district is paying for a \$750,000 remodeling this summer, which includes a new front entrance and improvements in the library and cafeteria.

The principal wants to reward teachers who do a good job. "We've got a school to turn around," he said. "We want the best and the brightest."

He expects teachers to do more and not take off as soon as the bell rings.

"When you're paid \$75,000 a year, and you say you don't have to call anybody after 3:05 p.m. That's got to change," Anderson said. "If we don't see improvement, they're terminated. It is what it is."

That's his mantra: Teachers must teach and students must learn.

Anderson means business. "If you don't like it here, you can go someplace else," he said bluntly. He was talking about students and teachers.

"If you're going to get into a fight, you're going to get arrested," he added, talking about students.

He's rebuilding the math faculty so parents don't have to hire tutors to teach their kids.

There's more blunt talk: If kids go out to McDonald's or Taco Bell for lunch and don't come back, he'll have them arrested because Jacksonville has a daytime curfew.

That means students can't be out on the streets when schools are in session.

Jacksonville High School hasn't had a parent-teachers organization in years. But now, it's forming a parent-teacher-student group that will hold monthly meetings.

Barry Hickingbotham, the assistant football coach, told the Rotarians that Anderson is the real deal.

"If he wants something done, he means it. That's why our school is turning around," the coach said. "If you miss two weeks of school, you miss two weeks of sports."

"He's what we need. Our school is improving," Hickingbotham said.

Anderson bought a house in Jacksonville. "I'm the first principal in years who's done that. Kids know where I live. They toilet papered my house."

But that's all right with him as long as test scores improve and the school gets better and more kids graduate.

"I'm loving it," he said.

Someone told Anderson he could be the next superintendent when the state gives back the district to local control.

"I'd love it," he said.

"We've got a great school," Anderson said. "We still have lots to do. Our kids deserve so much more."